

TAILS & TALES

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ABSTRACT

Tails & Tales is a collection of work that explores the construction of identity within a contemporary painting practice. Based on an autobiographical use of my own body as source material, this series of paintings and drawings incorporates narrative strategies of representation alongside imagery that is reminiscent of childhood states of being.

This thesis exhibition and support paper explore the liminal period of pre-adolescence and poses questions about the positing of identity. There is a focus on the construction of masculinities and sexualities, with a particular interest in how cultural, social, and moral norms are encoded into being.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis exhibition to my parents, Ron and Dianne Folk. While my appreciation of their support has more often than not remained unvoiced, their assistance in all matters over the past several years has allowed me to pursue my goals and continue to further my practice. Without them, this exhibition would not have been possible. Thank you.

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TAILS & TALES

Sometimes, it seems that contemporary art and contemporary painting are too far at odds with each other to be one and the same. In an age indebted to postmodernism, current artistic practices are all too eager to eschew their historical traditions in favour of the total breakdown and eradication of the conventions of narrative painting.

Representational painting, in particular, is problematic as it runs the risk of implicating oneself in the historicist traditions that reinforce social and cultural norms and re-encode pre-existing praxis and hierarchical structure. As the majority of the work in *Tails & Tales* is large-scale easel painting focusing on the narrative use of the male figure, I have to ask myself, “Is it possible to pay homage to the historical roots of painting while remaining complicit in our current cultural practices?” The work in this thesis exhibition is intended not only to explore this question, but also to expand on my own interests in the construction of personal and public identity.

The work in *Tails & Tales* is informed by narrative stories and an interest in nostalgia, role-playing and performative actions. Of primary importance is exploring the liminal state between adolescence and adulthood. Specifically, I am interested in the inherent role this period plays in the construction of both personal identity and gender norms. My work recognizes the nostalgic gaze – and longing – for the perceived innocence of the idyllic childhood state and suggests the desire to return to that state. Through narrative strategies, I am interested in revealing the self-contradictions of such a possibility. *Tails & Tales* promotes the recognition that, despite our longing and desire for such innocence, we cannot recapture this psychic space. There is an acknowledgement that this innocence never really existed but is, rather, propagated as an ideal state of being. In effect, *Tails & Tales* seeks to lay bare the contradictions of this liminal state. It is one that simultaneously defines and determines gender and sexual norms. But, it also provides fertile ground in the development of personal and social identity.

Narrative is a 4-Letter Word:

Narrative is normally a dirty word when considered within the tenets of postmodernism. Not surprisingly, this is in large part due to the political agenda of the movement to break down and eradicate “master” or “meta” narratives. As metanarratives such as science and religion function to provide absolute and universal truths, their ability to reinforce structures of power and dominance has, rightly so, come under attack.¹ As Robert Fulford proposes, the danger of metanarrative lies in the fact that it “speaks with the confidence of unalterable and unassailable truth – and yet paradoxically, it is always in the process of being altered.”² This process of alteration comes under suspicion, though, as it offers the illusion of change without the actual mechanism being enacted. And, as a result, it is a logical extrapolation that postmodernism, in its drive to deconstruct, has become suspicious of all narratives – beyond the “master” or “meta”, including any storytelling in general.

Despite this, there is undeniable evidence that the appeal of narrative has not diminished and, if anything, is finding new ground among contemporary artists. While this is in large part due to the continual breakdown of – and hybridity between – popular and “high art” forms of entertainment, Johanna Drucker acknowledges the role that generational shifts play in this emerging return to storytelling.³ Drucker proposes that the taboos against narrative and figuration are being eradicated as many emerging artists are simply unaware of the prohibitions that modernism and postmodernism had established against storytelling and narrative respectively. Further, she evidences the appeal of our love affair with popular culture forms and the use of narrative to provide a point of reference within the chaos of our contemporary climate. The enduring appeal of

¹ D. Strinati, “Postmodernism and Popular Culture,” in *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge Presss, 1995), 66. In exploring the breakdown of distinctions between popular culture and high art, Strinati provides insight into the politics of postmodernism as well as several distinct examples of the characteristics and strategies employed by the movement.

² Robert Fulford, *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Ltd., 1999), 32.

³ Johanna Drucker, *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 41-48. Drucker provides a new framework for interpreting the work of contemporary artists. Here, she outlines in part how the breakdown of codes in modernist and postmodernist ideologies has occurred and how strongly commercial and popular culture forms have come to inform artistic production.

narrative has much to do with exploring the complexity of identity politics, both personal and social. And, as such, the work in *Tails & Tales* can be considered as analogous to these ideas.

The majority of mediums generally associated with narrative structure (i.e., film, prose, etc.) are defined in large part by their temporal nature. They provide a controlled beginning, middle, and end. Yet, the obvious translation of story into a two-dimensional artwork, such as a narrative painting, precludes this possibility. The object itself is by and large considered to be static. This property allows for certain opportunities for the work in *Tails & Tales*. It provides a necessary characteristic for the success of the narrative – the perceived removal of the author’s (or my) voice in structuring the holistic “read” of the story and providing the viewer with polyvalent possibilities when interacting with the makeup of the narrative. The resultant ambiguity facilitates an open-ended story that seeks to establish a de-centered subject – both in the painting and for the psychological space of the viewer – that does not predetermine the viewer’s reaction to the work.

This de-centering is an important and necessary condition. In her discussions on Hollywood film, Laura Mulvey examines filmic devices that operate to privilege the viewer (an avowed male, hetero- spectator) through the enactment of various pleasure principles.⁴ Mulvey’s arguments are predominantly concerned with conditions of spectatorship that benefit patriarchal power structures. And, as such, she makes clear how these processes are reliant upon the stabilization of the male viewer in order to mitigate the potential threat of loss or lack of control. The viewer is centered and solidified into a position of power. In *Tails & Tales*, my intent is to establish conditions that undercut this centering and shift both viewer and subject from a stable position of ownership. But, rather than simply severing this connection (for example, by utilizing devices of postmodernism such as fragmentation), *Tails & Tales* aims to create an ambiguous state that vacillates between verisimilitude and fantasy. My intent is to promote a shifting state in which the viewer moves back and forth from the centered position of ownership.

⁴ Laura Mulvey, “Visual pleasure and narrative cinema,” in *Visual Culture: the Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: SAGE Publications, 1999), 381-389.



Figure 1. David Folk, *Back and Forth*, 2007, oil on canvas, 64"x120".

This is all-important for *Tails & Tales*. My goal is to provide insight into the construction of the narrative – and, by extension, the construction of identity. The intent of this approach is to allow my paintings to provide this insight without establishing conditions of authorship that proscribe interpretation. My goal is to simultaneously personalize, yet de-individualize, the narrative in order to destabilize the viewer's response. This subversion works to undermine notions of established authenticity and strives to create a queer space that endorses the questioning of our understanding of identity.⁵

Further, it is important to acknowledge that a queer space occurs primarily through the juxtaposition of the recognizable and the uncanny.⁶ As such, the works in *Tails & Tales* utilize several devices intended to promote ambivalence and the de-centering of the viewer. The most obvious of these devices is the formal construction of

⁵ James Knowles, "'Hypothetical Hills': rethinking northern gay identities in the fiction of Paul Magrs," in *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring Contemporary Boundaries*, ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 143. While Knowles's essay is primarily concerned with the literary works of Paul Magrs, his insights into authorship and authenticity in the construction of queer spaces is equally applicable to visual mediums.

⁶ Ibid. Knowles also discusses how "...in recognizable spaces and places, introducing the potential of the fabulous and the queer throughout our typography, rather than confining it to specialised zones [of fantasy or the purely imaginary]," has the transformative power to create this queer space.



Figure 2. David Folk, *Riding Along*, 2007, oil on canvas, 96"x78".

the pictorial space and the play between the real and the unreal. All of the figurative compositions are established within the representational tradition and are beholden to a certain level of realism in their depiction. But, these compositions are placed within a pictorial space that refutes verisimilitude. Background elements are flattened or eliminated while the action of the narrative occurs on the fore- and middle- grounds of the painting. In *Back and Forth* (see figure 1), for example, the expanse of green suggests an open field. But,

the flat paint handling and the inclusion of yellow stripes call into question the “truth” of the pictorial space and posit an unreal landscape – figurative and metaphorical – on which the narrative is enacted. Even paintings such as *Riding Along* (see figure 2), although slightly more truthful to illusionistic space, still contain decorative elements that maintain a sense of flatness and promote the idea of a constructed environment.

Similarly, the repetitive use of my own body as source material is intended to heighten this de-centering. Throughout the exhibition as a whole, and even within the individual paintings that have multi-figure compositions, I have chosen to use myself as subject. This repetition is intended to heighten the viewer’s ambivalence due to the detection of the same body occupying the same physical space. As my work is not a strict mimetic representation of myself, initial responses to paintings such as *Back and Forth* are not reliant upon identifying all figures as the same person. In *Round About* (see figure 3), the inclusion of masks conflates the potential of the viewer to identify the multiple figures as being the same. Despite this, however, the similarities are available. Beyond facial recognition, the repetitious use of the same body type or other elements



Figure 3. David Folk, *Round About*, 2007, oil on canvas, 60"x84".

such as hair and eye colour provide enough information to unsettle the viewer. While (s)he may not be entirely sure of this multiple identity, the intention is to provide enough information to at least call into question how the figures simultaneously inhabit the space.

Secondary to this, it was important to use my own body as reference throughout the entire exhibition for other purposes. While each of the paintings can be read separately, in structuring all of the work for *Tails & Tales* – and acknowledging that all of the paintings are seen together – I am, once again, addressing the notion of my authorial voice. Positing an omniscient, narrative voice that remains separate from the subject runs the risk of universalizing the content and promoting authenticity and authority. Instead, it is important to base the narrative in the personal – both my body and my experience – to underscore the subjectivity of the content. And, this subjectivity is instrumental for both myself and for the viewer. Using the individualized but not wanting to individualize the content may initially seem contradictory. But, I hesitate to promote the idea that my voice can and does speak for others. It is my intent that my own subjectivity does not prescribe interpretation or didactic instruction as to the construction of identity. Rather, I am simply aiming to provoke the questioning of such processes, albeit conceived through first-person subjectivity.

Obviously, my choice to consistently re-represent my own body raises questions of narcissism. But, such usage goes beyond the standard and facile definition of

narcissism as simple self-love or obsession. As Mulvey explains, the act of narcissistic identification is a primary factor in ego identification and the development of identity.⁷ While this is achieved through particular devices that reinforce anthropomorphic relationships and connections with the human body, Mulvey offers that this is more than simple delight in the discovery of “same”. Rather, it is a process of recognition/ misrecognition with the identification of self and subject that results in fascination and scopophilic pleasure.⁸ While Mulvey’s arguments largely exclude any positive potential within narcissistic identification, Bill Marshall suggests that narcissistic processes provide the possibility of an evolving text. In contrast to Mulvey, Marshall proposes that narcissism reinforces its negative connotations so long as it remains indebted to the concept of physical mastery of the body – as in the stereotypical and overtly masculinized archetypes of the Hollywood action hero.⁹

Marshall further puts forward that narcissism functions as a necessity in identity-based construction and is a required component of both personal and social development. Rather than reducing this function to essentialist reaffirmation of external moral and social codes, however, Marshall suggests that it is the shifting nature of the very process of ego identification that provides value. Investments, whether ‘good’ or ‘bad’, in external ideal standards of identity construction remain unfixed and shift in accordance with the hegemonic order. And, as such, the process of internalization through which narcissism operates “actually represents a way of reducing, not affirming, rigidity of self.”¹⁰ Marshall’s arguments suggest that narcissism can avoid the pitfalls of Mulvey’s proposed and inescapable process of indoctrination into the patriarchal order. Instead, Marshall views narcissism as a process of interplay – between character, between author and audience, and between audience and the screen – that is characterized by multiplicity and intertextuality.¹¹

⁷ Mulvey, *ibid.*, 382-383.

⁸ *Ibid.* Mulvey’s arguments are specifically geared towards scopophilia and narcissism as devices that work to reinforce patriarchal privilege. As such, she focuses predominantly on the destructive aspects of narcissism as employed by narrative cinema. In that these devices are highly gendered, Mulvey argues that narcissism works solely to reinforce this privilege.

⁹ Bill Marshall, “The national-popular and comparative gay identities: Cyril Collard’s *Les Nuits fauves*,” in *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring Contemporary Boundaries*, ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 89.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

In *Tails & Tales*, the repeated use of my own body is intended to function in much the same way. As opposed to simplified self-reflection or desire, my body acts as a signifier both of me and as a necessary component of narcissistic recognition for the audience. The resultant relationship between subject and audience is not set up to establish nor deny myself as the subject/object of desire. Rather, it is a textual reading that interacts and interweaves with the viewer's own processes of narcissistic identification and formation. The convergence of these multiplicities operates as a reciprocal relationship in which I, as subject and author, am complicit within the narrative. I neither stand above nor beside the viewer, but intersect within that interplay.

Lastly, and again working towards the de-centering of the viewer, the inclusion of the remaining narrative elements in *Tails & Tales* works towards describing a queer space. Most often, it is the use of objects that make reference to childhood that does so. The concurrence of the adult male body in a space inhabited by juvenile activities and/or children's actions or toys works towards an anachronistic or disjointed framework. Whether it's the use of pinwheels as a stand-in for a field of flowers, a child's hobbyhorse, playing games with sock puppets, or wearing bunny masks, these elements are intended to heighten the viewer's dislocation. While on the surface these devices may seem innocuous, their juxtaposition with the naked male body is, at best, unsettling.

It's All Just a Game – Nostalgia and Childhood:

The narrative frameworks of the paintings in *Tails & Tales* are navigated through the lens of nostalgia and nostalgic longing. As I am working with themes of identity, based on first-person narrative, it is not surprising that the device of nostalgia – based in childhood longing – is the ideal choice for structuring these interrogations. For, nostalgia has certain, key characteristics that lend themselves both to such questions and to furthering the development of the queer space I am seeking to expand.

Most often, nostalgia is considered as rather simply a longing and/or desire for the past. But, its definitions and meanings are much more complicated and are rooted in historical traditions of classification. Elsbeth Probyn examines this history and traces the roots of nostalgia – as characterized by medical, psycho, and social discourses – in

her own discussions exploring memorial writing and queer sensibilities.¹² Probyn suggests that the characterization of nostalgia as a pathology has ultimately been abandoned by such discourses and fallen out of favour with pathological acts of categorization. And, as a result, nostalgia has been freed from such strictures and, “is now free to wander...it moves between present and past, nostalgia is no longer tied to an origin or a cause.”¹³

It is this very displacement that provides nostalgia with its ability to inform queer narratives. As Probyn also suggests, the fractured history of nostalgia and its subsequent dislocation has resulted in a “tension that renders it apt for the expression of queer childhood memories.”¹⁴ For, nostalgia “produces its object” and “scrambles any sense of a fixed beginning.”¹⁵ The temporal nature of nostalgia is also carried forward through the search to reconcile past and present. Nostalgia contains a necessary contradiction as it seeks to recover an impossible past and non-existent origin while attempting to validate a linear and coherent connection to the present. But, this need for unification – by its very nature – results in disjunction and further distancing.¹⁶ As a strategy of representation, then, nostalgia has particular applicability to queer narratives. It both denies fixity of origin while simultaneously involving itself in the dialectic of identity formation.

For my purposes, the nostalgic gaze is directed towards childhood and pre-adolescence. As the dominant ideology of childhood presupposes that this period in life is one of innocence, it denies the complexities of identity formation. More particularly, this ideology reinforces codes of gender and sexuality as it takes for granted the “natural” masculine/feminine and heterosexist codes of the central order.¹⁷ It therefore simultaneously rejects any notions of difference or deviation from sanctioned codes of

¹² Elsbeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1996), 114-116. Probyn provides a genealogical survey of the shift of nostalgia from an actual physical and somatic condition in the 1600's to, by the 19th century, a psychological condition as defined through respective medical and psychoanalytical discourses.

¹³ Ibid., 116.

¹⁴ Ibid., 115.

¹⁵ Ibid., 116.

¹⁶ Linda Anderson, “Autobiographical travesties: the nostalgic self in queer writing,” in *Territories of Desire in Queer Culture: Refiguring Contemporary Boundaries*, ed. David Alderson and Linda Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 71.

¹⁷ Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, ed., introduction to *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2204), ix.

conduct. In *Tails & Tales*, the work incorporates both symbols and actions of childhood in the attempt to break down the fixity of identity construction. In juxtaposing these symbols and actions within the adult sphere of the attendant figures, I am aiming at disrupting perceived normativity and mimicking the de-centering effects of the nostalgic gaze.

All of the work in the exhibition has pointed references to a pre-adolescent state of being. While these references may be direct – as in the hobbyhorse of *Riding Along* – more often than not, they are indicated by the actions of the central figures. This is characterized by a state of play. The figures of *Back and Forth* engage in a dialogue enacted through the play of sock puppets. The figures in *Round About* perform a masquerade – literally and figuratively – in the donning of masks and in a simple children’s game of clapping hands. The performance of these games is indicative of the performance of identity. They take on an active property – much as gender and sexuality, itself, is enacted.

Sign Language – Symbolism and Iconography:

Surface readings of the objects included in the narrative choices for the paintings in *Tails & Tales* may seem readily apparent. But, the symbols and signs often serve multiple purposes and meanings. While it is not necessary for the viewer to know or understand all of these, oftentimes, personal associations and references, their ability to function on several levels provides greater opportunity to expand the potential of understanding for the work in the exhibition.

The primary impetus for structuring the paintings comes from my own interest in fairy tales and fables that are generally intended for young audiences. In large part, the appeal of these types of stories comes from an interest in exploring how the structure of these tales operates to educate youth in the social order. According to Jack Zipes’ socio-cultural theory, the general acceptance and acceptability of these stories for children was largely enabled because fairy tales “indoctrinated children according to gender-specific roles and class codes in the civilizing process.”¹⁸ Fairy tales became

¹⁸ Jack Zipes, *When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition* (New York & London: Routledge, 1999), 15.



Figure 4. David Folk, *Bunny Boy*, 2007, oil on canvas, 40"x48".

established, didactic forms meant to provide social instruction to the young. As a narrative tool of education, it is not surprising that the initial stimulus for my work was to utilize references to these types of stories. Their use in socially indoctrinating youth references my own examination of the construction of identity.

The main and most obvious reference is, of course, the inclusion of animals and/or animal symbols in the paintings of *Tails & Tales*. A primary device in fairy tales and fables is just such a use of animals. A particular appeal for me, however, is how these animals often function in anthropomorphous fashion and take on the characteristics of human beings. In *Tails & Tales*, the inclusion of the ravens in *Back and Forth* or the dogs in *Riding Along* are intended to go further than the literal operations of play between human figures and animals. Rather, they become figurative stand-ins. They are meant to be read in conjunction with the actions of the human body on display. And, the opposite holds true. In *Round About* and *Bunny Boy* (see figure 4), the masked figures take on the attributes of the associated rabbit and, in *Rollin' Around* (see figure 5), the figure enacts the action of the dog. All of the paintings in *Tails & Tales* suggest that these interactions are complicit and operate within a harmonious, if not symbiotic, relationship. Yet, the series of drawings, *Picking Fights with Small Animals*, functions according to conflict and adversarial interactions.

Secondary characteristics relate to traditional iconography and symbolism. The raven stands as a trickster or an omen of bad fortune. The rabbit makes an obvious reference to hyper-sexuality. And, the dogs are symbols of the domestic order. These



Figure 5. David Folk, *Rollin' Around*, 2007, oil on canvas, 34"x46".

rather simple associations, while likely apparent to most, are only fully understandable when considered in their anthropomorphous context.

Further symbols refer back to the connection to childhood. Both the bunny masks and the pinwheels draw direct parallels to play and, most importantly,

“made” objects for such acts.

The pinwheels also act as a

substitute for – and work on the same level as – the flowers and floral patterns that occur throughout the work in the exhibition. More specifically, both pinwheels and flowers are generally associated with sexuality – the flowers, in particular, with a further reference to the passage of time and “momento mori.”

Another significant allusion is the continued reference to domestic spaces. All the paintings incorporate decorative elements that originate from wallpaper patterns. While my use of these motifs is not intended to replicate the wallpaper itself, it is evocative of interior space and the action of decorating one’s environment. However, I have also used these motifs in compositions that distinctly make reference to exterior spaces. The garden and backyard become staging grounds for the action. But, it remains ambiguous as to whether these spaces are actually interior or exterior, public or private, constructed or natural. Even in *Riding Along*, the most suggestive of an outdoor yard, this suggestion is mitigated by the inclusion of the silver-leafed, polka dot pattern that works to flatten the background space and the flowered archway that acts as a literal framing and staging device. The work in *Tails & Tales* is intended to simultaneously suggest the private and personal (the domestic) while operating on the level of public presentation.

Last but not least, many of these symbols make indirect reference to the traditions of painting. Oftentimes, this may not be primarily evident to others than



Figure 6. Joshua Reynolds, *Love me, love my dog*, date unknown, oil on canvas, private collection.



Figure 7. Henri Matisse, *La Danse* (second version), 1909, oil on canvas, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.

myself, but they are conscious indications of both the history and the act of painting. The dogs and hobbyhorse in *Riding Along* refer directly back to the 18th century tradition of British portraiture and the work of artists like Joshua Reynolds (see figure 6). The inclusion of dogs and horses into representations of the “domestic” life of the nobility in such paintings provides interesting evidence of the structure of class distinctions and, hence, its appeal for my own work. *Round About* is a direct reference to Henri Matisse’s *The Dance* (see figure 7) both in its compositional structure and its colour palette. And, further, the floral motif is also suggestive of Matisse’s own interest in the decorative as evidenced by his own prolific use of wallpaper and patterning. Even the use of colour is primarily influenced by the works of artists like Jean-Honoré Fragonard and Antoine Watteau. My use of pinks, blues, and greens is meant to evoke the almost saccharine quality that is typically associated with the Rococco sensibility. Of course, this association is furthered by these artists’ own practice of depicting the domestic – albeit one that is dictated once again by nobility and class. Many of these references run the danger of being too esoteric, but it is my belief that they have the potential to bring added value to the work in *Tails & Tales*. I have made a distinct effort to ensure the work is not reliant upon these and other sources. But, for those who can glean the references, they have the ability to enhance the viewer’s understanding.

Me and My Naked Body:

When I first picked up a paintbrush, a confluence of various experiences seemed to predetermine the male body as my choice of subject matter. I was a senior level art history student whose main area of research was 19th Century painting. I was beginning to become largely influenced by gender and queer theory. And, I was undertaking communication studies, with a slant towards contemporary visual representation in the media. The latter two experiences shaped and influenced my own art historical researches. Prior to the 19th Century there had – of course – been representations of both the male and female body, albeit in the guise of religious or allegorical painting. Yet, it was during the 1800's that the nude female was solidified as the vehicle for scopophilic desire and voyeuristic pleasure and became the pre-eminent trope for representing the naked human body in secular visual arts. The nude male form, however, virtually disappeared from the lexicon of painting except for a brief resurgence in late Victorian England.¹⁹ As such, I became particularly interested in using the tools of gender and queer theory in seeking to revisit the history of painting and re-interpreting works of art through the lens of masculinity and sexuality.

Concurrently, my researches into contemporary visual culture evidenced the increase of eroticized male imagery into media and advertising.²⁰ I began to wonder when and why depicting the naked male body had disappeared from the perceived 'fine arts'. And, even more so, I was intrigued by the re-emergence of the male body into popular culture while it remained absent from contemporary painting. The naked male body had in fact become almost ubiquitous in fine art photography – not surprising considering the linkage between meditations on the body and the closeness of the medium. Yet, in contemporary painting, the naked male body was seldom represented outside of the work of a few artists such as Eric Fischl, Lucien Freud, and Attila Richard

¹⁹ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Male Trouble," in *Constructing Masculinity*, ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson, (New York: Routledge Press, 1995), 71-72. Solomon-Godeau's essay compares contemporary media images of the male body with late 19th century painting and explores how apparently divergent and non-phallic masculinities are enacted within the popular conscious.

²⁰ Ibid, 74-76. Solomon-Godeau also posits that these non-phallic or "soft" masculinities of contemporary advertising do not necessarily refute patriarchal privilege and have little to do with emancipatory notions of gender. Rather, she evidences the subtle operations by which alternative masculinities can still enact power and privilege.

Lukacs. As an emerging painter, I was interested in this dichotomy and choose to work towards re-integrating the male body into my own practice.

Like many beginning painters, I used the long-standing tradition of artists' self-portraiture as a tool to build my technical skills. Besides...I was readily available (and inexpensive!) as a model for reference. Yet, I quickly considered the use of my own body on the content of my paintings. Positioning myself in my work was reflective of my own longing to take an active part in the acknowledgement of myself, and my body, as both the possessor and subject/object of visual pleasure. And, I was striving to come to terms with my own physicality. I was – and am – hardly the masculinized, heroic male figure of contemporary visual media or historic painting. Using my own body was indicative of certain contradictions. I recognized the importance of working towards an acceptance of body image, but was still complicit in the by-product of our culture industry. I desired the athletic, heroic ideal pervading popular – and particularly gay – cultures, yet reacted against this longing for an unrealistic and un-maintainable standard of masculinity.

As the work in *Tails & Tales* evidences, my return to more narrative painting is indicative of a means of exploring the construction of identity. While body image is still a concern, I am primarily interested in how and why our cultural, gender, and sexual identity is posited. As this is cloaked to a large extent through an autobiographical framework, I am more beholden than ever to a continued use of my own body as a reference. Despite the continued increase of the eroticized male body in popular culture, painting the naked male body often runs the risk of working towards a specialized or niche audience. But, it is my hope that the use of my own naked body – without a literal or metaphorical fig leaf – can provide alternative insight into the construction of masculinities and sexualities.

Finding My Place:

I am always dubious in seeking to position my work within any artistic context defined by prevalent ideologies or trends. But, acknowledging the artists and traditions by which the work in *Tails & Tales* has been influenced does provide supplementary evidence to the goals of my artistic practice. Obviously, the work I'm influenced by is



Figure 8. Paula Rego, *First Mass in Brazil*, 1993, acrylic on paper on canvas, 54"x71".

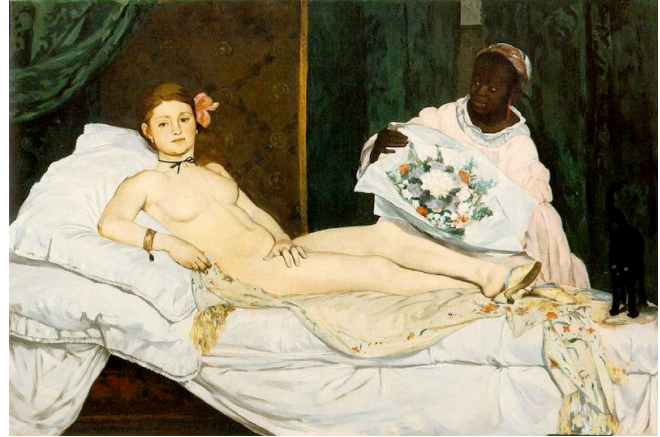


Figure 9. Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, 51"x75", Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

predominantly figurative and, most often, it also refers back to questions on the construction of gender and sexuality.

Work by artists such as Paula Rego has been highly influential. While Rego's work is characterized to a great extent by the particular cultural influences of her native Portugal, her use of symbolism merges fantasy and narrative.²¹ As a result, Rego's paintings are always saturated with questions concerning the positing of identity as mitigated by race and class and their ability to encode gender and sexual norms. Further, Rego is an artist who is also strongly aware of the history of painting and often incorporates that knowledge into her work. *The First Mass in Brazil* (see figure 8) makes a clear and pointed connection to Manet's *Olympia* (see figure 9) and incites dialogue on the traditions of European painting and the intersection of colonialism. While my own work is more restricted to zones of sexuality and masculinity, I feel an affinity with the ability of Rego to merge the history of painting with her use of narrative and discourses surrounding gender.

Similarly, Canadian artists Marcel Dzama and Gretchen Sankey explore concerns that are of interest to my own practice. Both artists are strongly influenced by popular culture and, in particular, a pointed interest in fairy tale forms. Dzama's drawings (see figure 10) use fairy tales and nursery rhyme figures and, like most of his work, establish both a fantastic and fractured narrative.²² Even more so, Gretchen Sankey's work (see

²¹ Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art Today* (UK: Phaidon Press, Ltd., 1995), 271-274.

²² *Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing* (UK & New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 2005), 90.



Figure 10. Marcel Dzama, *untitled*, 2003, ink, watercolour and root beer on paper, 14"x22".

figure 11) is directly involved with the re-creation of fairy tale precepts. Sankey's work is not celebratory regarding fairy tales. But, rather, it points to the pedagogical history of storytelling while re-working the tales in the hopes of undermining the privilege of this tradition.²³ Even though the fairy tale influence in my own work is not as directly obvious, there is a strong affinity with my intent. Most direct is the influence of story and the subsumation of youth and childhood references into identity politics.

And, the work of another Canadian artist, Daniel Barrow, has similar connections. While Barrow's work is performance based, his combination of spoken-word and drawing is based in an interest in childhood. Barrow's interweaving of comic book imagery, historic and pop culture references, and melancholic short performances raises poignant questions on the power of childhood to construct identity.

The appeal of these artists – and the influence of other historic and contemporary painters – is a large component of how I respond to my own work. Artists such as Manet have been instrumental in shaping both my interest in the representation of sexuality and my response to the materiality of the medium of painting. The reductive,



Figure 11. Gretchen Sankey, *Sneak a Peek*, 2002-2003, ink on paper, 15"x11".

²³ Hal Niedzviecki, "Contemporary Creatives Reconsider the Fairy Tale," in *Mix Magazine*, 28.2 (2003): 44.

yet responsive, passages of Manet's wet-on-wet paint handling remains an important benchmark for my own use of the material. Both Lucien Freud's and Jenny Saville's evocative materiality in representing the human figure has been seminal. And, Elizabeth Peyton's and Marlene Dumas's sensitive, yet sensual, approach to the figure continually delights my own sensibilities. Both conceptually and formally in my approach to my materials, my responses and interactions to these and other artists continually inform my own work and practice.

Conclusion:

The intent of the works in *Tails & Tales* is centered within the development of structures that operate to set up conditions of juxtaposition and ambiguity. These conditions are both literal and metaphorical and there are numerous contrasts within the narrative frameworks of the paintings. The flattened pictorial space works in opposition to the rendered figures...the adult male body is included in an unreal space populated by actions and attributes that reference childhood...performance and play interweave with and traverse one another...

All of these processes and circumstances are intended to establish a situation of viewership that promotes a queer space. And, it is important to recognize that this queer space should not be equated to an oversimplified understanding of a 'gay' space. For my purposes – and for the work in *Tails & Tales* – a queer space cannot be defined solely by a particular point of reference or definition. Rather, it is a space that is intended to allow for a multitude of experiences, understandings, and potentialities to intersect.

While sexuality is an obvious component, a queer space denies categorization in favour of expansion. Issues of sexuality, masculinity, and class, etc. come together to promote difference and proffer plurality. And, even more so, a queer space remains free of the evaluative judgments and preconceptions that are so inextricably linked with the need to categorize, define, and label the "Other."

Because of this, the predominant aim of this exhibition is not to suggest or put forward any one specific ideology behind the construction of identity. Instead, it is an attempt to offer up circumstances that promote the questioning of – or insight into – how

these processes work to inform identity. For me, personally, the frisson established by seemingly disparate or disjointed elements lets this happen. And, if *Tails & Tales* allows the viewer to dwell however much so in the physical and psychic space I am seeking to generate, it has achieved my goals.

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